

Memphis Soul In Performance At The White House

by Peter Stone Brown

There is no doubt, in fact the prove is irrefutable that Barrack Obama has brought some excellent music to the White House. Bill Clinton for all his vaunted hipness, didn't come close. In 2010, there was "A Celebration Of Music Of The Civil Rights Movement," last year was "Red White and Blues," and this year, "Memphis Soul." There was a time when the thought of any of the performers on any of these shows getting anywhere near the White House was out of the question. All the shows were broadcast on PBS, and taking into consideration where they took place and who these shows are aimed at, they all had their moments and their faults. For instance, last years blues show had a little too much Mick Jagger and not enough Buddy Guy. And this is not a put down of Jagger or The Stones. They were deep into Chicago blues before most people knew what it was, and like many other musicians they certainly did their part in pointing out where their music came from. However, taking into consideration that most blues musicians haven't had the easiest time of it, if you're going to put the spotlight on them, then put the spotlight on them, rather than one of the most famous and richest singers in the world, no matter how much he's into it.

Last night's concert showed President Obama walking on-stage to "Green Onions" and delivering a short speech showing his appreciation for the music that emerged from Memphis in the '60s. Then the show began with "Soul Man" with Sam Moore and newcomer, American Idol star Joshua Ledet taking Dave Prater's part. Ledet who was coincidentally celebrating his 21st birthday had a look of disbelief on his face, more than likely overwhelmed by performing at the White House and to be singing with Dave Moore, with Booker T playing organ. The band, led by Booker T with Bobby Manuel was great, nailing everything.

Mavis Staples followed with "I'll Take You There," a number one hit recorded on Stax. Mavis Staples is one of those performers who seems incapable of doing wrong and it was truly great and kept the pace of the show moving.

Then Memphis-born Justin Timberlake appeared accompanied by Steve Cropper for "Dock of the Bay." Timberlake played it fairly straight and for the most part avoided any vocal excess, but there was something missing, something didn't seem quite right. Some songs simply are sacred and "Dock of the Bay" is one of them. The song was the first Otis Redding single released following his tragic death in a plane crash in 1967. What made the song doubly poignant at the time

was with its rhythm acoustic guitar backing, it showed Redding starting to move in a different musical direction, but we'll never know what shape that direction might have eventually taken. On top of that, the loss of Redding was a contributing factor to the beginning of the end of Stax/Volt as a label and that whole era of music. While Cropper replicated his original part with care, Timberlake sang it initially as a regular old soul song and ended it as a happy clap-along. Both Otis Redding, one of the most amazing singers to ever grace the planted and his song deserved a bit more.

Then came one of the night's best surprises, Eddie Floyd, the man who wrote and had the first hit on "Knock On Wood," someone who's been pretty much forgotten over the years appeared with a fine rendition. He was followed by the Alabama Shakes with guest Steve Cropper paying tribute to Albert King with "Born Under A Bad Sign." Booker T joined in singing the "Wine and women is all I crave" verse. The whole performance brought the energy level way up.

Queen Latifah who was also handling some of the emcee chores for a charged rendition of Ann Peeble's "Can't Stand The Rain." She was followed by one of the greatest Stax/Volt songwriters and singers, William Bell singing his classic "You Don't Miss Your Water." One of those people who deserves way more acknowledgement and appreciation than he's received, just seeing him sing this song made the entire show worth it.

Then Joshua Ledet appeared to sing Percy Sledge's "When A Man Loves A Woman." Now while this song has all the attributes of Memphis Soul, if you want to get technical this was Muscle Shoals song, not a Memphis song. More to the point, Percy Sledge, easily one of the greatest soul singers of all time is alive and performing. Why wasn't Percy Sledge on the show? For his part, Ledet started the song okay, but midway through resorted to vocal excess. Not just vocal excess, but vocal excess to the max. Okay, maybe they want to show the music is being carried on by a younger generation, and Ledet certainly represents that. But what made the singers as well as the players at Stax/Volt and also at Muscle Shoals great is they all knew less is more. They didn't over emote. Otis Redding could fill up every possible space in a song, but he always left you wanting more. Joshua Ledet left you wanting less - way less.

Then for some inexplicable reason Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite appeared to do a song from their latest album, "I'm In I'm Out, and I'm Gone." Now, yes, Charlie Musselwhite is originally from Memphis. He was originally known as "Memphis Charlie." He is also one of the great blues harp players. Ben Harper is a very

talented musician. But this song, which was sort of a straight blues song had no place on this show. It had nothing to do with Memphis soul. It seemed to be the longest song of the night and simply dragged down the energy and the pace of the night.

The show was saved by Sam Moore returning for a fine solo version of Sam and Dave's classic, "When Something Is Wrong With My Baby."

Then Cyndi Lauper appeared for a cover of Otis' cover of "Try A Little Tenderness." (For some reason Musselwhite played harp on this. The song he should have played on was "Can't Stand The Rain.") This was Otis Redding's tour de force, the song he closed all his shows with. There are several recordings and videos of him doing it. Lauper meant well, her performance was sincere, but she couldn't get close. She wasn't in the same state, let alone the same city or the same block. Of the singers on the show, probably Mavis Staples might have gotten within reasonable proximity. The show ended with Booker T singing "In The Midnight Hour," with the entire cast taking the stage to share in the vocals. In the long run, it was an hour long concert at the White House paying tribute to some of the greatest music ever committed to disc. As such some parts were great and some parts shouldn't have happened. For the real thing find the video of the Stax/Volt Revue in Europe.